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International Internships in Agribusiness Curricula: A Proposal for Implementation

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***Abstract:** International internships complement classroom instruction in preparing students for careers in the agribusiness industry. For experiential learning to be an integral part of agribusiness management training, the student, industry and educational institution must each play a role in the design and implementation of the program. This paper discusses issues pertaining to the development and implementation of international internships and emphasizes the interrelationships between agribusiness students, industry and educators.*

***Key Words and Phrases:** Experiential learning, International internships, Agribusiness, Internship plan.*

Many U.S. agricultural colleges offer degrees in agribusiness. The primary objective of these curricula is to provide students with the tools necessary for successful careers within the agribusiness industry. This is usually achieved by requiring students to develop skills in management, economics and agriculture through a combination of classroom instruction, independent study and internships. In the past, emphasis was placed on classroom instruction. More recently, colleges of agriculture have sought to increase their students' job-related international experience through internships, cooperative education and similar programs. This is primarily due to the changing needs of agribusiness employers responding to a dynamic and increasingly global marketplace.

Firms competing in international markets recognize the need for future hires to have a better understanding of diverse cultures, international finance, customs regulations and other skills necessary to compete in a global environment. One way to develop these attributes is through structured internships that allow students to work directly with agribusiness firms in other countries or with multinational agribusiness firms in the United States. This type of program provides students with practical learning experiences that require them to relate classroom studies to real world situations while improving their understanding of other cultures. If agricultural colleges are to prepare future employees of the agribusiness industry, curricula must help students prepare to compete in a global marketplace. International internships can play a key role in this training.

Although the importance of internships to agribusiness curricula is well documented, much of the literature concerning internships has focused on their various attributes rather than discussing means of implementation. For example, Baker and Woolverton discuss agribusiness internships from the perspective of adding an international component to agribusiness curricula. Although the advantages and disadvantages of agribusiness internships are discussed and potential problems are identified, procedures for implementation are not addressed.

Other literature reports on specific internship experiences. For example, *Baylor Business Review* discusses examples of internships with an integrated marketing services firm and an accounting firm. The implementation of an institutional-sponsored internship with a university lab management office is reviewed by Hornsby and Johnson. Claxton and Lorenzen discuss implementation of internship programs in the fields of mass communication and journalism. Although this literature provides useful information regarding the implementation of internships in specific fields, very little documentation exists regarding a general framework for implementing international internships in agribusiness.

This paper differs from the previous literature by examining the interrelationships between students/interns, industry and educational institutions necessary for the operation of successful international agribusiness internships. The objective of this paper is to discuss issues related to the development of this type of program. Among these are the benefits of internships to the participants, the cultivation of industry participation, and the need to overcome cultural barriers. The paper also discusses matching students with internships and reviews the formulation and implementation of firm-specific internship plans. In addition, methods for monitoring and evaluating programs are outlined. The final section presents the conclusions of the paper.

Benefits to Students and Curricula

An internship program plays several roles within an agribusiness curriculum. First, internships provide students with an opportunity to apply and refine skills gained in the classroom, thus enhancing classroom instruction. No matter how proficient educators are in teaching business concepts and communication skills, most of these skills must be practiced if they are to be mastered. This allows the student to focus on those skills integral to a career in the agribusiness industry. Of course, internships cannot replace the core of course work required in agribusiness curricula, but the two should work together to strengthen the overall learning experience.

While the internship allows students to gain experience in the agribusiness industry, it also provides the opportunity to experience a potential career choice.

Moreover, a well-structured internship requires students to carefully think out plans prior to their work experience. In addition, most institutions encourage students to cultivate their own internship opportunities. Requiring them to search and interview for internships strengthens their job-searching skills. Whether students are interested in pursuing careers that are domestic or international in scope, international internships offer opportunities to gain an understanding of global issues beyond the classroom setting. All other things being equal, these experiences will aid students in procuring employment. This need is especially vital to the student when entry level positions are scarce.

An internship program also provides opportunities for academic institutions to receive feedback from industry about the direction and success of their curricula. The role of the institution can range from an integral and central role in developing, coordinating and evaluating the program to a less active ancillary role. Regardless of the educational institution's role, it stands to benefit from participating in internship programs. The primary benefit results from contact with industry, which provides feedback for curriculum development. As a profession involved with the marketing of goods and services to the agribusiness industry, it seems this benefit would be especially clear to educators. Whether the final consumers of their products are students or industry, agribusiness educators must stay abreast of the current needs of a dynamic agribusiness industry. Contact through internship programs allows for a two-way information flow between industry and educators, providing industry with information about the curricula in academic departments and providing educators with information about the needs of the industry.

In summary, an internship should be viewed as an important component of the educational system. Classroom knowledge or real-world experience offered individually can provide several benefits that are attractive to the employer. However, when provided as components of an overall package, they provide benefits that are, arguably, greater than the sum of their parts. Given the desire of agricultural colleges to increase enrollment, internship programs that enhance the qualifications of graduates will be of value in attracting prospective students.

Implementing International Internships

Whether an internship program deals primarily with domestic or international companies, several components are involved in developing and implementing a program that will benefit all participants. The first involves the identification of a select group of agribusiness firms suitable and committed to participate in an internship program. Another important element is careful matching of students with internships. Finally, the long-term success of the program requires continuous

monitoring and evaluation. This section discusses each component of the process in the context of developing an international internship program.

Industry Participation. The identification of a pool of potential agribusiness firms operating in the target geographic region is essential to the long-term success of an internship program. These firms must be able to provide the necessary environment for a successful learning experience. In the case of an international business this means the internship should be flexible enough to provide students with exposure to the firm's international operations. At the same time, the internship should achieve the training and operational goals of the firm. For example, a multinational producer of fruit products might provide an internship that consists of several weeks learning about production practices and management issues in the company's major fruit producing region. This would give the student exposure to cultural and business practices that will broaden his or her understanding of the global economy. An internship of this type allows the company to evaluate the abilities of potential employees to adapt to international settings while providing some initial training in operations.

Another key element in cultivating industry participation is the clear explanation of the benefits of the internship program to the agribusiness firm. A primary benefit to agribusiness is the development of relationships with academic institutions. More specifically, employers benefit from direct input into the educational process and the opportunity to screen potential employees. This enhances the firm's ability to recruit entry level employees. For example, an internship program provides the opportunity to screen potential long-term employees at a relatively low cost. International internships not only provide these benefits, but contribute to the preparedness of future employees by broadening their understanding of agribusiness issues in a global context.

Another benefit to the firm comes through short-term staff support. Upper-level undergraduate or graduate students typically have adequate training and experience to make a positive contribution to the firm. For example, an intern working for an international agribusiness firm could assist in market research, data entry or the preparation of reports for clients. These activities may require minimal training on the part of the firm, yet provide staff support for many of its operations. Companies of all sizes can benefit from these types of activities, depending on the overall structure of the internship program and the care taken in matching the skills of students with the appropriate internship. However, it is important to remember that the long-term benefit to the company does not come from the intern's contribution to daily operations, but from developing relationships with educational institutions that provide services that enhance the firm's pool of quality applicants.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers. Coordinating interns, employers and educational institutions in an international internship program poses many problems. Difficulties coordinating and developing viable industry links are compounded when

cross-cultural barriers are added to the mix. In particular, language and cultural barriers may be significant obstacles for students wishing to participate in internships outside their home countries. Yet, if students are to gain the necessary international experience to compete in the global job market, these obstacles must be overcome.

One solution is creation of intern partnerships, which can be organized and coordinated by academic institutions. This involves pairing a student from the United States with a student from a participating foreign country. An intern partnership can be structured to facilitate observation and participation by interns in various operations of the international agribusiness firm or organization. This approach involves the partners working in the foreign location of a multinational agribusiness firm and later in its main office. At the same time the pair is required to perform various tasks that contribute to the goals of the company. The intern partnership consists of a plan of work as outlined by the employer, a prospectus that specifies the student's learning objectives, and an internship course of study to provide the structure necessary to achieve these goals.

Another solution is a partnership between academic institutions in the United States and other countries. A cooperative arrangement could be developed that eases the difficulties associated with coordinating and implementing an international internship program. Ideally, this would involve both the U.S. and foreign institutions adopting similar responsibilities for the internship program. For example, both institutions should provide an internship coordinator responsible for the cultivation of industry participation, matching their respective students to intern partnerships, and monitoring internships in the host country. These programs should not be difficult to develop since many academic institutions have existing student and faculty exchanges with foreign universities. However, programs of this type require a significant commitment of faculty time and resources.

An additional issue that must be addressed is the cost of international travel. Several potential sources may be used to cover these expenses. In some cases, students may be willing to fund all or part of their travel expenses. This is not an unreasonable expectation since many study-abroad programs operate in this manner. Academic institutions may also provide scholarship funds to help defray travel and other expenses. Finally, if the internship is viewed as beneficial by the agribusiness, the firm may provide travel funds.

The Role of Internship Plans. An important component of an international internship is the development of company-specific internship plans with well-defined educational and operational goals. Once agribusiness firms have been selected, workshops should be conducted involving company representatives, potential interns, and academic coordinators to design internship plans that provide optimal partnerships for both employers and interns. The first of these workshops should involve a planning session between representatives of the agribusiness firms

and the academic coordinators. The purpose of these sessions is to design a company-specific internship. These workshops will result in an internship plan that specifies the duties and responsibilities of all parties involved in the internship. Although the cost associated with the formation of internship plans will be high during development of the internship program, the purpose of these workshops can be accomplished using alternative means of communication, e.g., telephone, fax and e-mail, as the relationship between academic institutions and industry matures.

Unique internships are designed according to the circumstances of the participating firms. Perhaps the company wants to evaluate the interns' suitability for managing one of its plants. The entire internship could focus on providing the interns a management experience at one or several of its locations. In other cases, the company may wish to provide a program that focuses on its marketing operations. The important point is that the internships are carefully planned to meet the training and operational objectives of the agribusiness firm and the educational goals of the students.

Matching Students with Internship Plans and Partners. Once internship plans have been designed, it is imperative that students be carefully matched according to career interests, communication abilities and interpersonal skills. Students should also be selected according to other criteria relevant to the specific internship plan. Personal interviews conducted by the academic coordinators at the respective educational institutions should be used to make the initial internship assignments.

After the initial assignments have been made, the selected interns should meet at the internship site, which should be specified in the internship plan. This pre-internship visit serves several purposes. First, it allows the U.S. and foreign interns to meet and get acquainted prior to their actual internship. The pre-internship visits will also allow partnerships to be formed and each intern to become more familiar with the partner intern's culture. This should lessen the degree of culture shock during the internship. Secondly, this visit will provide the agribusiness firms with an opportunity to interview participants and approve selected pairings. In addition, this trip will give these students an opportunity to tour the operations of the agribusiness firms.

Upon completion of the pre-internship visit the students complete a prospectus outlining their specific learning objectives for the internship. The prospectus requires each student to define his or her personal goals in the context of the internship plan and identify internship activities that will contribute to achieving career goals. The students' goals should be consistent with their career objectives and the objectives of the internship as outlined by the internship plan. These documents are sent to participating companies for review and approval. After approval, arrangements are made for students to begin their internships.

Monitoring the Internship and Academic Credit. A structured internship is an educational experience that is monitored, in many cases, by an academic institution.

Internships may require that students complete some minimum number of credit hours or required courses to prepare them for their internship. For example, students may be expected to complete one or two terms of a foreign language prior to enrolling in an international internship. This helps ensure that students have acquired a level of maturity and some language skills prior to enrollment. The number of credits is often based on the number of hours worked or the time frame of the internship. In addition, an upper limit is usually placed on the number of credit hours that can apply toward a degree. However, this limit will vary from one institution to the next depending on faculty philosophy and curriculum goals. Not all institutions offer academic credit for experiential learning. However, many colleges and universities feel this type of program is an important part of the curriculum and worthy of credit.

Formal academic credit for the internships is administered by the respective institutions through an internship course. Interns enroll in this course at their respective universities. As part of the course, each intern should prepare weekly reports and formal papers on his or her internship experience. An oral report after the internship has been completed may also be desirable. In addition, the employer should be expected to submit an evaluation of the intern.

The weekly report should document the interns' activities and experiences during their internships. An intern is expected to discuss experiences in the operations of the organization and any other significant events. Information in these reports will allow the academic institution to track the progress of the interns. Reports also allow the institution to determine if the activities performed are consistent with the internship plan and the student's stated learning objectives. In addition, the employer will evaluate each intern and the overall program at the midpoint and end of the internship. These reports allow the educational institution to evaluate the success of the internship from the perspective of all participants.

The written reports should be supplemented with on-site visits by a representative of one of the academic institutions. Post-internship questionnaires can also be administered through personal interviews with both employer and interns. They permit the evaluation of the internship experience and provide the feedback necessary to improve the overall program.

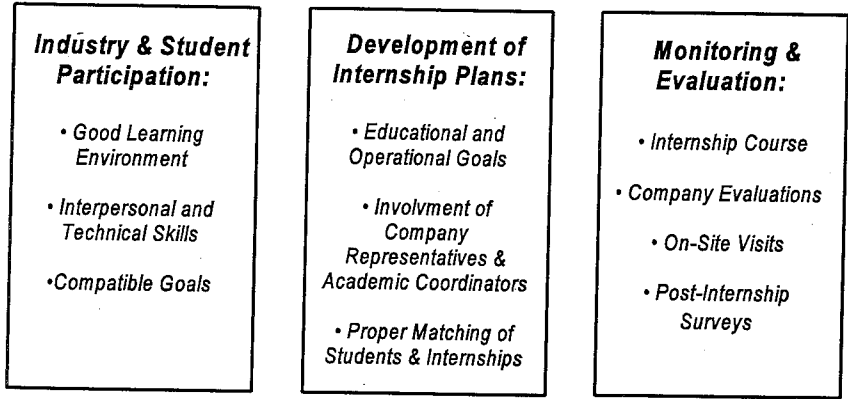
Summary and Conclusions

The framework presented in this paper provides a useful model for implementing successful international internships. This model is summarized in Figure 1. A successful program demands that proper emphasis be placed on several components. These include the encouragement of industry and student participation, development of company-specific internship plans, and monitoring and

Figure 1.

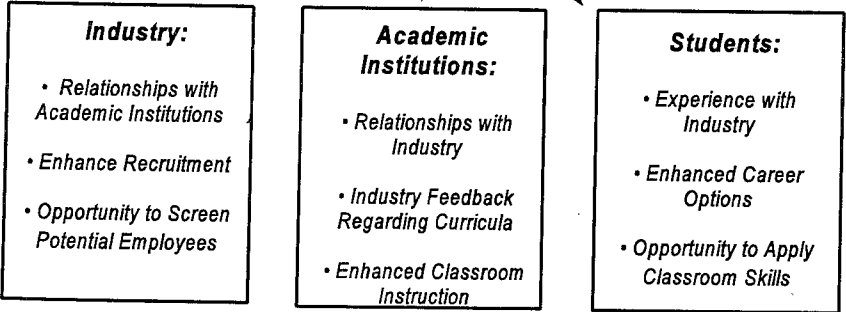
Requirements and Benefits of a Successful International Internship Program

Requirements



Successful International Internship Program

Benefits



evaluation of the program. It is important that educational institutions select industry participants that provide students with the environment for a rich learning experience and opportunities to develop interpersonal and technical skills. The industry goals should also be compatible with those of the student and the educational institution. Internship programs must be based on company-specific internship plans with well-defined objectives. An internship plan assures that the internship is carefully structured to meet the educational goals of individual students and the operational needs of participating firms. Consequently, development of successful internship programs must include the involvement of academic coordinators and industry representatives. Students must also be carefully matched with internships. The selection of less-than-adequate students as intern candidates, and the resulting poor performance in the internship, may deter the future participation of both students and firms. Careful monitoring and evaluation provide information that can be used to refine the program. This may include some combination of an internship course, company evaluations, on-site visits, and post-internship surveys.

International internships provide many opportunities beyond those received through domestic internships. However, problems associated with domestic internships are compounded in an international setting. Difficulties in coordinating and developing multinational industry links, as well as language and cultural obstacles, must be overcome. The international internship program outlined in this paper lessens these problems by pairing students from different cultures. It provides a unique opportunity for these students to develop cross-cultural interpersonal skills while broadening their education. Each requirement in Figure 1 is integral to building and maintaining an internship program. Consequently, faculty and staff at the participating educational institutions must be prepared to contribute a significant amount of time to the endeavor. However, if proper attention is placed on each of these components, the program will result in a number of benefits to agribusiness industries, academic programs and student participants.

Notes

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